DESCRIPTIVE CATALOGUE OF THE RAFFAELLO TAPESTRIES.

Executed at Brussels in 1517, by order of Pope Leo X. From the celebrated Cartoons at nt Hampton Court. Now exhibiting at the Gallery, No. 213, Piccadilly.

While the public attention has of late been so much directed to architectural decoration, we cannot do better than to say a few words on the subject of the celebrated Raffaello Tapestries.

Perhaps no other mode of decorating the walls of buildings yields such beauty and magnificence, or affords a greater opportunity of bringing out the skill of eminent artists. It is true, that while some of the paintings of the old masters, through a happy union of materials and execution, have by time become rather perfected than injured, others have miserably faded. So in tapestries, when they become venerable, like these, the same vicissitudes must be expected: the effect of centuries of dust and damp must be reckoned upon. These, however, are no more faded than might have been expected under the most fortunate circumstances. No doubt their lights must have become somewhat deadened, and in some portions of the dark tones, the colour seems to have chipped off, leaving the thread light, as though not worked in-grain; and we were informed of the curious circumstance, that the distances in the pictures, which are perhaps now over-vivid for such subdued parts of an effect, had entirely disappeared from the tapestries, through being packed up in cases during ten years, and only slowly returned to view after exposure to the light.

These works, which are exciting comparatively little notice in this vast metropolis, where so many rivals claim attention, on the first day of their exhibition at Manchester, caused so much excitement among the manufacturers, that no less than 800 persons visited them; and at Liverpool their exhibition-room was almost equally thronged.

This exhibition consists of seven magnificent pieces of tapestry, forming part of the set of ten, presented by Pope Leo the Tenth to King Henry the Eighth.

When Leo was embellishing the galleries and walls of the Vatican, he commissioned Raffaello D'Urbino to furnish designs for a series of tapestries from scriptural subjects; and to this circumstance the world is indebted for the celebrated cartoons of that master, which were designed by him expressly and entirely for this purpose. Leo caused two sets of the tapestries to be executed at Brussels, which were done from the instructions of Raffaello himself, and under the constant superintendence of his talented pupils, Bernard Von-Orlay and Michael Coxis.

One set continues to adorn the walls of the Vatican after having been twice carried away among the most valuable spoils which the fortune of war put into the hands of the conquerors:—the first time at the sack of Rome by Bourbon's army in 1526, after which they were restored during the Pontificate of Julius the Third by the Duke of Montmorenci:—they were carried away the second time on the invasion of Italy by the French in 1798, and were restored by purchase in 1814.

The other set, of which the present exhibition forms a portion, having been presented as before mentioned, remained in the possession of the Crown of England until the death of Charles the First, and were considered as some of the most valuable ornaments of the royal palace at Whitehall. They were sold in the time of Cromwell to the Spanish ambassador, Don Alonzo de Cardenas, and by him carried to Spain; they were afterwards in possession of the Duke of Alva's family until 1823, when they became the property of Mr. Tupper, the British consul, who brought them back to England; and from him they passed into the hands of the late proprietor.

From these circumstances, the authenticity of which is well attested, they possess a value and interest altogether different from, and superior to any other works of the kind in existence, with the exception of the duplicate series at Rome. They are remarkable for being *finished representations* of the *original designs of Raffaello*, and for the singular fidelity with which the spirit and expression of the immortal artist are carried out. They are also very valuable to the lovers of the arts, as serving to correct the errors that were committed by Cooke when he repaired the cartoons by order of King William the Third, which had been cut into strips, and defaced and otherwise injured by the use made of them as patterns for the tapestry, and moreover some of the pieces had been lost. These tapestries claim the merit of shewing the designs of Raffaello in their perfect state.

Nine only of these are in existence—seven corresponding to the Cartoons at Hampton Court, and two others, namely, the Stoning of St. Stephen, and the Conversion of St. Paul, of which the Cartoons are irretrievably lost. They are all in an excellent and equal state of preservation, the colours having suffered comparatively little from the lapse of nearly 330 years. It has been found impossible to obtain in London, at the present season, a gallery of sufficient height and size to exhibit these tapestries at the distances from which they should be viewed, as, although their details are finished with the nicest accuracy, and bear the closest inspection, the effect of the whole is best felt and understood from a distance: and two of the pieces, viz. the Death of Ananias, and Paul preaching at Athens, are of necessity excluded from want of room.

No. 1. Christ's Charge to St Peter.—Dimensions, 18 feet 7 inches wide, 12 feet 8 inches high.

The locality is the Lake or Sea of Tiberias—numerous buildings (part of the city of Tiberias) form a beautiful back landscape. The figure of Christ in this tapestry is undoubtedly one of the most noble representations of our Saviour that was ever conceived and executed. His air of Divine composure and calm dignity contrast finely with the fervent devotion of the kneeling St. Peter, who is listening to the command of his master, "Feed my sheep." St. James and St. John are the two next figures, the latter strikingly characterized by an expression of affectionate attention: the figure further back in profile is St. Andrew, and is of finished elegance. Behind St. Andrew is St. Thomas, with a book in his hand; this figure is marked by an inquiring position. The heads of all the Apostles are finely diversified, and many nice distinctions and gradations of character are portrayed. The graceful draperies are elaborately and beautifully wrought, and the colours harmoniously blended.

In comparing the tapestries with the Cartoons, it will be observed that they are exactly reversed in position. In the latter, all the figures are left-handed, in order to render the tapestry perfect and right-handed; and the figures, &c. on the right side of the one are on the left of the other.

No. 2. St. Paul and St. Barnabas at Lystra.—Dimensions, 19 feet 4 inches wide, 13 feet high.

On the right, St. Paul and St. Barnabas are standing beneath a portico—the former indignantly forbidding the sacrifice: "Sirs! why do ye these things?" averting his head and rending his clothes; St. Barnabas, with clasped hands, implores Heaven to stop the profanation. The sacrificial group is of especial force and beauty. The Priest of Jupiter, of Herculean proportions, is raising an axe to strike down one of the oxen. A young man, supposed to be Timothy, is endeavouring to arrest his arm. Another priest, of strongly-developed muscular powers, is bringing in a ram. On the foreground appears the cripple, who has just been restored, clasping his hands in the eagerness of gratitude and joy—his crutches lie useless at his feet, and an old man raises his garment with a look of astonishment at the restored limb. In the background is the Forum of Lystra, with several temples, and a statue of Mercury.

This subject is an instance of the consummate skill of Raffaello in bringing together a variety of circumstances, so as to make his story perfectly intelligible. The figures and heads, as well as the grouping and drawing, are perfect. The whole is full of movement, interest, and dramatic effect, and the spirit and power with which all these are expressed in the tapestry are most wonderful.

No. 3. The Beautiful Gate of the Temple.—Dimensions, 18 feet 4 inches wide, 13 feet high.

The magnificent composition before us offers great scope for display and contrast. The architectural details are expressed with singular accuracy and effect in this tapestry, while the expression and character of the actors in this wonder-stirring scene are vividly portrayed. To appreciate the great merit with which the architectural part is executed, it is desirable to view this subject from as great a distance as the limits of the gallery will allow.

The figure of St. Peter, who is holding by the hand a miserably deformed cripple, is one of much dignity and grace, mingled with full confidence in the power by which he speaks the words "Rise up and walk." The expressive and well-formed head and neck, and finely delineated hand and foot, are severally studies in themselves. The beloved disciple's countenance expresses benevolence and deep compassion. The misery and distortion of the cripples are made as striking as possible, to contrast with the elegant and graceful figures abounding in this tapestry. The young female on the right, who is carrying an offering to the temple (and leading a child with another pair of doves), is considered a model of feminine beauty. Immediately over the cripple is a fine Jewish head strongly expressing doubt and incredulity: between him and St. John is another of much dignity and lofty sentiment. In the cartoon, probably from having been rubbed and effaced, the deep wrinkles in his forehead have been converted into a fillet, which is decidedly injurious to the expression—this alteration is further proved by a sketch from the original, drawn by Antonio, now in the British Museum, which is perfectly free from fillet or other covering. The figures between St. John and the beautiful female, another female on the other side, with a splendid head-dress, and carrying an infant, and the figures between the columns, are all most worthy of observation, for the diversity of character and expression they offer. On the whole it may be considered that as this is one of the most striking of the invaluable designs of Raffaello, so is it also one of the most effective of the tapestries, when viewed in proper light and from a right distance.

No. 4. The Miraculous Draught of Fishes.—Dimensions 14 feet 6 inches wide, 12 feet 9 inches high.

With this subject Raffaello commenced his great undertaking of a series of cartoon drawings, illustrative of some of the principal events recorded in the New Testament, for the execution of these tapestries.

The locality is the lake of Gennesareth, where "as the people pressed upon him to hear his words," our Saviour entered into the boat of one of the fishermen, and "prayed him to thrust out a little from the land."

The point of time is that when having, in obedience to the Divine command, let down their nets, although they had "toiled all the night and had taken nothing," they inclosed such a "multitude of fishes that the nets began to break;" and Peter, awe-struck and terrified at the presence of a Being of supernatural power, falls on his knees exclaiming, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord!" Throughout the whole of this composition nothing is tame or weak.

In the action and form of our Saviour we discover the usual felicity of the artist's genius. The Divine composure of Omnipotence, the simple and graceful posture, the countenance radiant with benignity, the hand which wielded the elements raised in accordance with his words, contrast finely with the merely human character of his companions. The head is in the most graceful style of manly beauty; so meekly grand, so benevolent, and yet so full of power.

In the air and attitude of St. Peter, is denoted that precipitate temperament which caused him to place himself foremost on all occasions. His countenance expresses mingled wonder, humility, and awe. There is also a striking difference between the rough hardy fisherman, the man of toilsome occupation, and the same person when represented as the inspired apostle, full of dignity and grace. (See the Beautiful Gate.)

The third figure is St. Andrew, the brother of St. Peter; his attitude is finely conceived and skilfully expressed; the entire figure is evidently actuated by an instantaneous and powerful impulse of awe and deference; the head and beard are finely proportioned.

In the second boat are the two sons of Zebedee, James and John, both still engaged

For a comprehensive guide on OCR and PDF Compression go to ThePaperlessOffice.org